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**Chapter 5.17**

**Historical Challenges to *Virtue Apologetics***

*The History of Immorality in Christendom*

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### **Primary Points**

- *Christendom* is individuals and institutions that claim Christ, but reject His teaching and are not regenerated believers or true Christians.
- Noting that the Roman Catholic Inquisition burned Bibles and murdered real Christians, obviously exposes it as a part of demonic *Christendom*.
- The Crusades were led by wicked Popes, and fought by the moral scum of Europe, attacking even Christians, and therefore, was not Christian.
- Fortunately, what matters most to the lost is not how some immoral Pope lived in the Middle Ages, but how they see us living now.
- The influence of Christian leaders stopped the Salem Witch Trials.
- Half of the entire population of the Roman Empire was slaves. To expect a small Jewish sect to overturn such an institution would be unrealistic.
- First century slavery was more humane than often thought. They were normally set free by the age of thirty and many after seven years of service. There was not life long slavery unless the person chose it.
- The goal of Christianity was the more important *conversion* of slaves and slave masters, not the secondary goal of *eliminating* them.
- "Although the gospel does not approve of removing slavery by social revolution, the gospel throughout history has brought the freedom of more slaves than any human philosophy, movement, or political system."
- While we may lament that slavery lasted too long in the Christian West, what religion has come even close to doing as much for slaves? None.
- While slavery is not acceptable in any "Christian" country, it continues to prosper especially in Buddhist and Muslim dominated countries.
- Much of the division in Christianity has occurred for virtuous reasons. For example, the Protestant Reformation.
- What the world may deem as disunity, is often actually virtuous diversity in things the Bible does not prescribe.
- "All in all, there is far more co-operation among churches than unwholesome rivalry."

## A) Distinguishing *Christendom* from Christianity

There are several immoral events in human history that are blamed on Christians, and therefore become an objection to *virtue apologetics*. Some of these can be immediately eliminated. For example, the claims of Klu Klux Klan members in America, and Roman Catholic and Protestant terrorists in Ireland, to be authentic Christians, are simply unbelievable. The One they claim as Lord commanded the very opposite of the arrogant prejudice and murder they practice, and will, in fact, condemn them all if they do not repent and really become Christians.

Nonetheless, it is important to be honest (an important virtue) and admit that some real born again Christians have committed or condoned some deplorable acts in our two thousand year history. One of the more appalling examples is the inexplicable and inexcusable approval by John Calvin (1509-1564) of the execution of Michael Servetus for heresy.<sup>1</sup> It would not be moral to brush such immoralities aside.

However, there are other historical incidents that many would claim against *virtue apologetics* for Christianity, and yet upon further inquiry, turn out to be unwarranted accusations. For example, John Mark Reynolds in the book, *UnChristian* writes:

If you are embarrassed by your heritage or worry that it is corrupt, this can destroy your confidence to act based on that history. One way bigots and tyrants try to oppress a people is to destroy their knowledge and pride in their heritage. This is the tactic of the so-called New Atheists. Obviously this patrimony is complicated and contains both shameful and honorable deeds. We are the people of great cathedrals but also of the tortures of the inquisition.<sup>2</sup>

No we are not, and we will demonstrate this below.

Likewise, Dr. Stuart Hackett, Professor of the Philosophy of Religion at Trinity denies the God-ordained and biblical place of *virtue apologetics* and gives the typically secular description of such events when he writes:

[I]f I expand the horizon of my vision to include the whole of history and civilization since the time of Jesus, I see even more disorienting sights. I see all the useless and morally indefensible battles and wars that have been fought in the name of Christianity, all the outright murders that have been justified on Christian religious grounds—not only Bruno at the hands of the Inquisition, but also Servetus at the hands of Calvin and the Christian city government over which he presided, plus unnumbered others from all the quarters of Christendom.<sup>3</sup>

*Christendom* is the key word here, as it will become evident below that many things done in the name of Christ, were not performed by Christians at all, but by the political and religious institution of *Christendom*. As we noted in the previous chapter, *Christendom* is made up of those individuals and institutions that claim the name of Christ, but reject His teaching and commands and are not regenerated believers or true Christians.

Far from being Christian, *Christendom* has in fact often been the greatest, cruelest foe of Authentic Christianity. Precursors to *Christendom* include King Saul and how his illegitimate kingdom treated the real King David, and the "**whitewashed tombs**" (Matt 23:27) of the Pharisees and how they treated the real King Jesus. Regarding *Christendom* D. James Kennedy (1930-2007) wrote:

Christianity is comprised of those who have repented of their sins and truly believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and their Lord. In times past Christendom was comprised of those people living in "Christian" territories.

Today, Christendom is comprised of true Christians and those professing Christians who have never experienced the saving grace of Christ. Many members of Christendom have lived lives that were totally unworthy of the name Christian.

When people are unregenerate--that is, if their hearts are not changed by Christ--they are prone to do all sorts of ungodly and inhuman things. It doesn't matter whether they're atheistic Communists or clerics in the Church. And in the case of unregenerate Church leaders, their evil actions have brought the blame of history upon Christianity. <sup>4</sup>

Jesus predicted a particularly deceptive kind of *Christendom* when He warned of "**false prophets . . . in sheep's clothing**" who are actually "**ferocious wolves**" (Matt 7:15) to real Christians. Christ spoke of "**many**" others who will "**prophecy . . . drive out demons and perform many miracles**" even in His name, but will be damned "**evildoers**" (vs. 22-23).

But He also said, "**a [morally] bad tree cannot bear good [moral] fruit. . . . Thus, by their [bad moral] fruit you will recognize them** (v. 18). And even unbelievers can too as real Christians demonstrate what real Christians do as opposed to the fakes. Accordingly, many of the infamous historical events often ascribed to Christianity can be exposed as acts of unregenerated *Christendom*. While we cannot claim that there were absolutely no real born again Christians involved in some of the horrible episodes Dr. Hackett mentions, a better understanding of some of them helps to significantly nullify their negative evidential value on *virtue apologetic* for the Christian faith.

## B) The Inquisition

One of the first events that come to people's mind is the Inquisition. This was a centuries old institution of the Roman Catholic Church starting with the the "Medieval Inquisition" (1184–1230s), including the "Spanish Inquisition" (1478-1834) and ending with the "Roman Inquisition" (1542 – c. 1860 ). Throughout these centuries, the Inquisition was an effort by the Roman Catholic Church to expose and punish what they considered to be religious heretics. Unfortunately torture was used in gaining confessions and burning at the stake was used for punishment. Historians estimate that between 12,000 and 32,000 people were killed in the Spanish Inquisition alone.<sup>5</sup>

However, to attribute its atrocities to born again Christians would be a complete distortion of the facts. Accordingly, D. James Kennedy wrote:

The Spanish Inquisition in particular was a monstrous epic of brutality and barbarity. It was diabolical in its nature. Was it Christians persecuting non-Christians? It was the very opposite. I am quite convinced that the members of the Inquisition Party were not Christians. They lived in the Dark Ages when the gospel of Jesus Christ had been all but forgotten, and the faith was so perverted that it bore little resemblance to that which had been given by Christ.

In many cases the victims of the Inquisition were evangelical Protestant Christians who had come to realize what the historic gospel of Christ was and who began to reject the papal superstitions of that time. These were the people who were often exposed to these tremendous tortures.

The authorities at the time of the Inquisition were banning the Bible. The powers who sanctioned and participated in the Inquisition were the same powers who forbade their people to read Scripture! They also forbade Scripture to be translated into the vernacular. They burned at the stake people who believed in, translated, or taught the Scriptures, contemptuously tossing each one's Bible into the fire to be burned with the martyr.<sup>6</sup>

Even non-Christians can recognize that people who would burn Bibles would not be Christians. In addition, the cruelty of the punishments meted out by the Inquisitors would be blatant violations of Christ's command for His followers to **"love your enemies . . . [so] that you may be sons of your Father in Heaven"** (Matt 5:44-45). Christ clearly implies here that if you do not love your enemies, you are not a child of God, nor a Christian.

The guilt and eventual divine damnation of the Roman Catholic Inquisitors is not relieved in the least by the fact that, while they

ordered tortures, they left the actual torturing to state officials. One historian notes:

Every one guilty of concealing a heretic forfeited thereby his land possessions or offices; the house in which a heretic was found was to be torn down. In case of sickness, however severe, no heretic or unbeliever was to be allowed the aid of a physician; penitents were to leave their home, to wear a peculiar dress, and could hold no office except by a special dispensation from the pope. . . .

As if these horrible treatments of fellow-beings were not bad enough, Pope Innocent IV [ironic name for a moral monster] in a bull (*De extirpanda*) in the year 1252, ordained that accused persons should be *tortured*, not merely to induce them to confess their own heresy, but also to compel them to accuse others.<sup>7</sup>

The Inquisition in many parts of Europe was primarily carried out by a special sect of Roman Catholics called the Dominicans. While having a “whitewashed” reputation for their spirituality, these monks revealed their spiritual depravity. “So much eagerness did they display in hunting up and prosecuting heretics, that a popular pun changed the name of Dominicans into *Domini canes* (the dogs of the Lord).”<sup>8</sup> Such a label was consistent with their practice:

Accustomed in the confessional to penetrate into the secrets of conscience, they converted to the destruction of the bodies of men all those arts which a false zeal had taught them to employ for the saving of their souls. Inflamed with a passion for extirpating heresy, and persuading themselves that the end sanctified the means, they not only acted upon, but formally laid down, as a rule for their conduct, maxims founded on the grossest deceit and artifice, according to which they sought in every way to ensnare their victims, and by means of false statements, delusory promises, and a tortuous course of examination, to betray them into confessions which proved fatal to their lives and fortunes. To this mental torture was soon after added the use of bodily tortures, together with the concealment of the names of witnesses. . . .

Any sort of testimony was admitted. Two witnesses who would only testify of a hearsay were considered equivalent to an eyewitness. . . . Friends and members of the family were also admitted to testify, but only against the prisoner, never in his favor. If the accused still persisted in asserting his innocence, he was now tortured by the whip, the water, and fire, under the direction of the inquisitors and the bishop of the diocese. If the prisoner then confessed, he was tortured a second time, to make him declare his motives, and afterwards a third time, to make him name his accomplices; and when the inquisitors had

obtained from him all they wanted, they left him to his sufferings, without allowing a physician to assist him. . . . After that he was generally condemned to imprisonment for life, or sent to the galleys [to be executed], his possessions sequestered, and his family dishonored.<sup>9</sup>

The target of the Inquisitors also exposes their practices to be demonic, rather than Christian. As Dr. Kennedy pointed out above, many of those tortured were real Christians who were protesting the moral abuses that were rampant in the Roman Catholic Church throughout the Middle Ages. The Inquisitors, "had a particular interest in the suppression of heretics [so called] who were incessantly declaiming against them, and who spared no pains to discredit them in the minds of the people."<sup>10</sup>

For example, one "heretical" group that was mercilessly persecuted in the Inquisition was the Waldensees which the Yale Church historian Dr. Latourette describes as follows:

In their tenets and practices the followers of [Peter] Waldo continued to seek to conform to the New Testament. They memorized large portions of its vernacular translations. Following what they believed it commanded them, they went about two and two, preaching, simply clad, barefoot or wearing sandals, and subsisting on what was given them by those who listened to them.

They refused to heed Pope or bishop and taught that the Church of Rome was not the head of the Catholic Church but was corrupt. They held that women and laymen could preach, that masses and prayers for the dead were without warrant, that purgatory is the troubles which come to us in this life, and that to be efficacious prayer need not be confined to churches. . . .

They observed the Eucharist together and held that, if necessary, any layman might administer it. . . . Many continued to think of themselves as members of the Catholic Church. . . .

For the most part the Waldensees were humble folk. Even their enemies described them as dressing simply, industrious, labouring with their hands, chaste, temperate in eating and drinking, refusing to frequent taverns and dances, sober and truthful in speech, avoiding anger, and regarding the accumulation of wealth as evil. Yet, branding them as heretics, the Catholic Church and the civil authorities sought to eliminate them, by persuasion if possible and if not by force.<sup>11</sup>

No real Christians would persecute and torture such people who were so obviously following the Lord.

Another group severely persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church during the Inquisition was the Cathari [or Albigensees]. Although not

completely orthodox in their beliefs, they were far more Christian than the Roman Catholics who oppressed them. Dr. Latourette writes:

What is now southern France, where the Waldensees and the Cathari had their chief strength, was fertile soil for such a movement. As we know from the statements of some of its own leaders, the Catholic Church in that region was unusually corrupt and had forfeited the respect of earnest souls. Some of the clergy compiled indecent books and permitted immodest songs to be sung in church. Many priests were luxury-loving, illiterate, indolent, profane, and tolerated simony and clerical concubinage. In such a situation a religion with high moral appeal and practice would gain a ready hearing. . . .

The Cathari claimed to find in the Bible support for their convictions. . . . As is so often true of persecuted groups with secret meetings, tales gained popular credence which accused the Cathari of the grossest immoralities. However, some of their most caustic critics bore witness to their high moral character. They were ardent missionaries. They seem to have been recruited largely from peasants and artisans, but they included some scholars and produced an extensive literature in the vernacular, including translations of the Bible.

Like the Waldensees, they flourished in the twelfth century and were most numerous in Northern Spain, Southern France, and Northern Italy. Indeed, the two movements had much in common and seem to have interacted upon each other. . . . The Cathari were but one expression of the religious ferment, chiefly Christian in its forms, which profoundly moved the Latin South of Europe in these centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Such were the types of people who came under the wrath of the Inquisition, demonstrating Dr. Kennedy's point above that it was a case of non-Christians persecuting Christians. Even godly Roman Catholic reformers such as Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) and the Franciscan monk Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135-1202) came under the persecution of the Inquisition.<sup>13</sup>

The real nature of the Inquisition became particularly apparent as the Protestant Reformation gained ground in Europe:

[In] spite of the terrors which it [the Inquisition] spread, voices were repeatedly heard in Spain to pronounce against it, especially when it developed all its power to crush out evangelical doctrines during the great Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. . . . It directed its power now against those who openly or secretly adhered to evangelical doctrines. It published annually an edict of denunciation, and convened its chief tribunals at Seville and Valladolid. But it also directed its power against such members of its own [Roman Catholic] Church as did not accept the

[heretical] doctrines of the Council of Trent concerning justification. . . .

The Reformation at last completely overthrew the power of the Inquisition in Germany, and the attempts to reestablish it, made mostly by the Jesuits, with an endeavor to check the progress of evangelical truth, as in Austria, Bohemia, and Bavaria (where a tribunal of the Inquisition was formally established in 1599), proved ineffectual, and of short duration. . . .

[H]owever, they succeeded in entirely suppressing Protestantism in Spain before the beginning of the 17th century. . . . [T]he [Spanish] Inquisition showed itself still very vigorous in persecuting all persons suspected of Protestantism, and all books containing their doctrines. Such as were found with heretical books in their possession, or had read them, were severely punished.<sup>14</sup>

In reality, the Inquisition is a very morally dark period of history for a spiritually unregenerated Roman Catholic Church, or *Christendom*, not real regenerated Christians. As Dr. Kennedy puts it, "There are so many who do not even know enough about history to be aware that evangelical Christians were receiving the tortures of the Inquisition and not giving them."<sup>15</sup> In defense of the Roman Catholic Church, Dr. Latourette notes that:

It may be significant that none of those who were most outstanding in the fifteenth century reform [Inquisition] in Spain--Isabella, Ximenes, and Torquemada--was ever canonized. In spite of their devotion and labours, in the judgment of the Roman Catholic Church they were not assuredly exemplars of the Christian ideal.<sup>16</sup>

Which is rather an understatement to say the least.

## C) The Crusades

Another event that is commonly held to discredit the moral superiority of Christianity is the Crusades, which also occurred in the Middle Ages and were led by the Roman Catholic Church. The Crusades is the name given for several invasions carried out from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries by European monarchs against Muslims who had invaded Palestine, including Jerusalem. Understandably, such a condition would cause great concern for the Church. Even greater alarm was aroused when eye witness reports from Palestine informed Europe that inhabitants there were being treated very cruelly by the Muslim invaders.

Like the Inquisition, the apostate Roman Catholic Popes saw this as an opportunity for political gain:

The popes encouraged this movement to the best of their ability. They saw in it an opportunity to extend the Church, to re-enforce their power, and to turn the warlike ardor of the Western [European] princes, which so often led to conflicts between Church and State, against the infidels. <sup>17</sup>

With these designs in mind, Pope Urban II called the Council of Clermont in 1095. Remembering that such a man was thought to be the personal present representative of Christ on Earth, we are appalled at a speech he gave to the Council in which he proclaimed:

A horrible tale has gone forth . . . an accursed race utterly alienated from God . . . has invaded the lands of Christians and depopulated them by the sword, plundering, and fire. . . . Tear that land from the wicked race and subject it to yourselves. <sup>18</sup>

While such a perspective may have been appropriate under the Old Covenant, no one truly belonging to the New Covenant would have demanded such a thing. The same is true of those who heard the Pope and cried in response, "*Deus vult! Deus vult!* [God wills it!]," which became the battle cry of the Crusades. Accordingly, the participants had the audacity to wear a cross, by which the Crusades gained their name from the French word for cross, *croisade*. Demonstrating the unChristian and unbiblical nature of the whole enterprise, one historian notes:

To encourage the crusades, Urban and the popes who followed him emphasized the spiritual "benefits" of war against the Muslims. Taking a page from the Koran, Urban assured the warriors that by doing this penance they would enter heaven directly-or at least reduce their time in purgatory. <sup>19</sup>

In addition, Dr. Kennedy writes:

It is helpful to get an idea of exactly who these Crusaders were, as evaluated by a [contemporary] man:

In that countless multitude you will find few except the utterly wicked and impious, the sacrilegious, homicides, and perjurers, whose departure is a double gain. Europe rejoices to lose them and Palestine to gain them; they are useful in both ways, in their absence from here and their presence there.

Thus he recognized them as essentially unregenerate reprobates, and everyone could rejoice that they were gone! This indicates the general caliber of the Crusaders and the fact that they were Christians in name only. <sup>20</sup>

Along the same lines, Dr. Latourette describes the Crusaders as: throngs poorly organized, set forth, some of them attacking the Jews or pillaging fellow Christians as they went. . . . The Crusaders were far from being ideal exemplars of the faith which they professed and few if any willing conversions from Islam were made by them. . . . Crusades were not confined to expeditions to retake or protect the Holy Places in Palestine. They were waged against . . . Christians, whom the Popes adjudged enemies of the faith.<sup>21</sup>

Dr. Latourette summarizes an accurate and Christian perspective on the Crusades:

Here was an effort to achieve the kingdom of God on earth by the methods of that world which the New Testament declares to be at enmity with the Gospel. To put it in Augustinian terms, it was the employment of the instruments of the earthly city to further the City of God. Arising from a mixture of motives, they enlisted much devotion. Here and there were Christians who questioned whether basically they were true to the Gospel and many more deplored the cruelty, immorality, and pride which went with them. However, the great majority of the Christians [in name] of Western Europe accepted them and endorsed them. In this the [unregenerated] Papacy, the head of the Western Church, led.

The Crusades constituted a complete reversal of the attitude of the early Christians towards war [exposing it as non-Christian]. As we have seen, that was predominantly one of condemnation. By the majority, participation in it as a soldier was deemed inconsistent with the Christian ideal. . . .

[The Crusaders] actually . . . retarded the understanding of the Gospel. They were an aspect of the partial capture of the Church by the warrior tradition and habits of the barbarian peoples who had mastered Western Europe and had given their professed allegiance to the Christian faith.<sup>22</sup>

The absence of real Christians in *Christendom* was especially apparent in Europe leading up to the Protestant Reformation. Accordingly, Dr. Latourette writes:

In the latter part of the twelfth and in the thirteenth century the Catholic Church in that area was weak and was represented by a body of clergy who were predominantly ignorant and corrupt. . . . Among high and low, in city, village, and country, among clergy, laity, and even monks, there were flagrant brutality, gross sensuality, and unrelieved arrogance and self seeking. To be sure, nominal assent was almost universally

given to the Christian faith. There was little overt denial of what was ostensibly the community religion.

In practice, however, Christian ethical standards were widely denied, and the most sacred rites of the Church were repeatedly and even habitually performed carelessly. . . . Church offices were bought and sold and their incomes diverted to purely selfish luxury, and to gratify their lust for power ambitious men strove for place and position in the Church. . . . Notorious scoffers were found in high places.

By 1500 it seemed that Western Europe, partially Christianized by the advances of the previous centuries, was being de-Christianized. The hardly won gains appeared to be in process of dissipation. Within the inner circle of the Church ill-concealed paganism was raising its head and in practice if not in word the Christian faith was denied by many of its official representatives.

. . . . We scarcely need to say that in practice Western Europe had never been Christian. Yet it paid lip service to that faith, canonized some of its monarchs for what it deemed their approximation to the Christian ideal, and read with approval Augustine's City of God. Now it seemed to be throwing off even the pretense of honoring what great Christians had endeavored to embody.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between regenerated authentic Christians and unregenerated immoral *Christendom* is real and significant. Accordingly, C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) wrote:

If ever the book which I am not going to write is written it must be the full confession by Christendom of Christendom's specific contribution to the sum of human cruelty and treachery. Large areas of "the World" will not hear us till we have publicly disowned much of our past. Why should they? We have shouted the name of Christ and enacted the service of Moloch.<sup>24</sup>

Admittedly, it may be difficult for some in the unbelieving world to make a distinction between unregenerated *Christendom* and regenerated Christianity, and such immoral deeds done in the name of Christ will surely, and understandably, weaken the effect of *virtue apologetics* for them. However, at least we can point out that such actions do not reflect the teachings of our Founder, nor can those who practice such atrocities claim that they are a follower of Christ. Such would not necessarily be the case of warring Muslims, for example.

We have discussed in the previous chapter that the Scriptures include a great deal of discussion on the need and method for distinguishing between Hell-bound religious *Christendom* and Heaven-bound reborn Christians. Christ pointed out long ago that just because

something is done in His name, it does not make it Christian (cf. Matt 7:21-23). The fact that fakes can profess many things, is one more reason that God has ordained that supernatural virtue, which fakes cannot produce, be the ultimate and universal argument for the salvific exclusivity of the Gospel of the King.

While the historical immoralities of unregenerate *Christendom* may dilute the power of this approach for some, it will not for most. God knows that what matters most to our spiritually dead friends, coworkers, and neighbors is not how some immoral Pope lived in the Middle Ages, but how they see us living now. The fact is, despite the immoralities of unregenerated historical *Christendom*, the potential effectiveness of *virtue apologetics* by contemporary regenerated Christians remains essentially unaffected. Just even a few acts of supernatural kindness by a real born again Christian will usually and easily outweigh any perceived negative moral evidence against Christianity that can be garnered from events occurring centuries ago.

## D) Salem Witch Trials

The execution of witches in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries was a practice carried out by those claiming to be Christians, in both Europe and America. It took its American form primarily under some of the early Puritans of New England. We would only point out again that the teachings of Christ and the Apostles would not give any authority to the Church or a Christian to kill people even as evil as witches, and would, in fact, condemn it to be a great sin to do so. Accordingly, anyone intimately involved in such sin would have no biblical warrant to claim to be a real Christian.

Nonetheless, while such actions were certainly unfair and horrific, they are often exaggerated by secular historians. For example, it may be important to note that relative to the claims that are often made, no witches were burned in America, and while several hundred were tried, only twenty were hanged.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Dr. Kennedy notes:

It is little known that it was the Church that actually helped to stop this hysteria. Both Increase Mather and his son, Cotton, leading Puritan ministers of the day, spoke openly against it. When Increase wrote a pamphlet, "Cases of Conscience," calling for the implementation of the biblical pattern of two witnesses, the killings stopped. As literary scholar Perry Miller concluded, "Increase Mather-and he alone-brought the murders to an end."

## E) Slavery

Slavery is, of course, one of the most despicable sins of the human race. In relation to Christianity, Dr. Kennedy writes:

Critics of Christianity like to point out that the lack of direct challenge of the institution of slavery from Paul or other leaders in the early Church constitutes a Christian complicity of sorts with slavery. In *Asimov's Guide to the Bible: The New Testament*, the late secularist Isaac Asimov [1920-1992] wrote:

[W]hile Paul urges kindness to the slave Onesimus, who is now Philemon's brother in Christianity, there is no hint anywhere in Paul that slavery might be wrong and immoral as an institution. Indeed, Paul even admonishes slaves to obey their masters, so that Christianity, however novel some of its tenets, was by no means a doctrine of social revolution.<sup>27</sup>

Several responses are in order. First, Dr. Asimov undoubtedly interprets the fact that there are no commands in Scripture for the abolition of slavery as an acceptance of it. This ignores the cultural and political environment in which Christianity began, and has at times existed since then. Slavery has been a widespread and ancient institution all over the world.

OT scholar Gleason Archer notes:

As to the moral status of slavery in ancient times, it must be recognized that it was practiced by every ancient people of which we have any historical record: Egyptians, Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Phoenicians, Syrians, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Greeks, Romans, and all the rest. Slavery was as integral a part of ancient culture as commerce, taxation, or temple service.<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, in the first century, slavery was an enormous and entrenched institution. Especially in large cities such as Rome or Athens, as much as three fourths of the population is thought to have been in the servant class. Overall, half of the entire population of the Roman Empire was slaves.<sup>29</sup> Many of these slaves had come from nations and cities that had been conquered through war. The only alternative was death. Many others were simply poor and could not provide for themselves, or were in debt. Again, bankruptcy, government welfare, etc. were not options, and slavery was the only alternative. Accordingly, it was simply a way of life.

To expect what began as a small Jewish sect to overturn such an ingrained and foundational aspect of society would be unrealistic. Christianity has simply not always been in a position to impose its will on the world. Accordingly, NT scholar N. T. Wright remarks:

[Early Christians] always struggled to humanize an institution it could not expect to eradicate; by privileging the Exodus narrative, it constantly appealed to a controlling story of the God who set slaves free; at some points, e.g., Philemon, it set a time-bomb beside the whole system.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, Dr. Latourette writes:

Christians carried on no organized campaign against slavery. That was to wait until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet here, also, although by no means so markedly as in the case of amusements [e.g. gladiatorial battles in the Coliseum], the trend of the Christian conscience and of Christian practice was against a basic, generally accepted institution of the Greco-Roman world and mitigated its harshness. . . .

Christianity undercut slavery by giving dignity to work, no matter how seemingly menial that might be. Traditionally, labour which might be performed by slaves was despised as degrading to the freeman. Christian teachers said that all should work and that labour should be done as to Christ as master and as to God and in the sight of God. Work became a Christian duty.<sup>31</sup>

However, in addition to first century slavery being an entrenched institution, it was not as inhumane as is often thought. Slaves were normally set free from servanthood status by the age of thirty. The Roman politician and philosopher Cicero (106 B.C.-43 B.C.) wrote that many slaves could even expect their freedom after seven years of service. Many women obtained their freedom even earlier because their masters married them, giving them full rights as wives under Roman law. There was not life long slavery unless the person chose it. Many people chose slavery as a way to learn a trade, then, were freed from it at the age of adulthood. There were strict laws against cruelty to servants, and socially it was honorable to treat slaves respectfully. Kidnapping people to sell them as slaves was illegal under Roman law. Therefore, the vast majority of slaves became such either by birth or voluntarily.

While a large proportion of the population were slaves, you would not have been able to clearly identify them by where they lived, what work they did, how they dressed, or how poor they were. The social status of the slave depended on the social status of their owner, and was not determined by their clothing or race. There was often very little difference between the work they did and the work of free people. Slaves and former slaves were teachers, managers, administrators, artists, politicians, and doctors. Even those in more menial occupations usually received a modest wage, and were permitted to save, to make purchases, to enter into contracts, and own property.

Often the relationship between a slave and an owner was much more like modern day relationships between employers and employees.<sup>32</sup>

We do not intend to diminish the cruel and demeaning nature of much of first century slavery, but a full knowledge of the facts allows us to properly interpret history.

While the above reasons for a perceived lack of influence on slavery by Christianity could be labeled cultural, there were also theological reasons that we will only briefly note here. For example, NT scholar David Clowney writes concerning the Apostle's advice to Corinthian slaves to remain in their calling:

For a modern person there are certainly puzzles here. But the theme of 1 Corinthians 7, "abide in the calling in which you were called" (v. 20), may provide the most helpful key. The gospel works gradually, like leaven. It appears that the apostles were interested in the transformation of life within existing social structures by the love and power of Christ, rather than in focusing on the structural social changes which the application of Christian principle would eventually bring. . . .

It is not a far-fetched rationalization, then, to say that the leaven of freedom was set to work in the New Testament by the apostles and that the full expression of it, when the dough had risen, was the abolition of slavery. Abolition was a consistent outworking of New Testament principle in a society in which the gospel had been at work.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, the goal of Christianity was the more fundamental and enduring *conversion* of slaves and slave masters, not the secondary goal of *eliminating* them. Any Christian slave would agree that freedom from the penalty and power of sin was infinitely more valuable than any other freedom. Accordingly, Dr. Kennedy explains:

If Christianity totally disallowed slavery, the gospel could not have spread as it did in the early Church. Once the gospel did spread, the seeds were sown for the eventual dissolution of slavery. Thus by reforming the heart, Christianity, in time, reformed the social order!<sup>34</sup>

In addition, Dr. Asimov is wrong to suggest, "There is no hint anywhere in Paul that slavery might be wrong and immoral as an institution." Quite the contrary, the Apostle wrote:

**We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers--and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God. (1 Tim 1:9-11)**

The Apostle would obviously even deny that a true Christian could be a slave trader. The Apostle Peter likewise, referred to “**harsh**” slavery as “**unjust suffering**” (1 Pet 2:18-19).

Also, Dr. Asimov is wrong to suggest that there were no socially revolutionary doctrines in early Christianity in regards to slavery. The Apostle Paul’s letter to Philemon is considerably more revolutionary than he and other critics of Christianity will admit. As Dr. Kennedy notes:

Paul had led both men [Philemon and Onesimus] to Christ and in his letter tells Philemon, "Receive him (Onesimus) not as a slave, but as a brother beloved." Millions of people in modern America have read that statement and have not been touched at all. Yet that was among the most revolutionary concepts the world had ever heard--a slave, an "animated tool," was a brother, beloved! Absolutely unthinkable and incredible!<sup>35</sup>

Likewise, Dr. Clowney comments on the letter of Philemon:

[T]he principles which the apostles laid down for life in the church are fundamentally incompatible with a system of slavery. . . . This incompatibility, together with the way Paul deals with it, is already evident in the case of Onesimus. Not only does Paul refrain from sending him back to Philemon until Onesimus is ready to go [which was against the Roman law], but he pleads with Philemon to recognize the way in which the old wineskins of the slaveholding economy will not hold the new wine of the demands of kingdom service.<sup>36</sup>

The Apostles also repeatedly commanded slave owners to respect their servants as real people, instead of animals. The Apostle Paul told Ephesian masters not even to “**threaten**” a slave, reminding them that *their* Master in Heaven is watching (Eph 6:9). In a similar context, he tells masters to “**provide your slaves with what is right and fair**” (Col 4:1). The Apostle’s instruction to slaves in Corinth is equally revolutionary when he writes:

**Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so.**<sup>37</sup> **For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.**  
(1 Cor 7:20-23)

One immediately notices that Paul encouraged a slave to gain their freedom, if and when they could do so. However, he says something else that a non-Christian will have great difficulty in understanding:

The fact that a Christian might be a slave is not a cause for great concern. Why? Because as we have said, it is much more important to be free from sin on the inside than slavery on the outside. Regardless of whether a man owns you, ultimately you belong to the Lord! And the slave could serve society and their earthly master in such a way as to bring glory to their real Master (cf. 1 Tim 5:14; 6:1; Tit 2:10).<sup>38</sup> In addition, as already noted, Christianity actually gave considerable dignity to slave work, equating it with serving God Himself (cf. Col 3:23-24). So much for Isaac Asimov's claim that, "Christianity . . . was by no means a doctrine of social revolution" in regards to slavery.

Even more so, Christians have been the foremost opponents of slavery throughout its history. Even the Oxford scholar Robin Lane Fox, who is somewhat critical of Christianity's influence on slavery in the first century, is willing to admit that the early "Christians were most numerous in the setting of urban households where the freeing of slaves was most frequent."<sup>39</sup>

Christians have not only been the most outspoken voice against slavery throughout its history, but it has been the foremost force behind its abolition. Accordingly, the respected Bible teacher John MacArthur writes:

Although the gospel does not approve of removing slavery by social revolution, the gospel throughout history has brought the freedom of more slaves than any human philosophy, movement, or political system. In past times, some Christians, unfortunately, have supported and tried to justify slavery. But the Bible does not; and where Christians are faithful to Scripture, slavery cannot flourish.<sup>40</sup>

It was the work of Christians, such as William Wilberforce (1759-1833), which eventually led to its abolition in the British Empire. Dr. Kennedy writes:

A strong evangelical, William Wilberforce . . . was a member of the British Parliament for decades . . . Wilberforce gathered other like-minded evangelicals to help him in the fight . . . The model Christian statesman in the history of the world, William Wilberforce worked tirelessly to halt the slave trade from Africa to the West Indies. After he spent twenty years diligently crusading against it, Parliament finally passed his bill to halt the slave trade. Then he worked indefatigably to free the slaves in the British territories; this battle was to last twenty-five years! Despite constant opposition and derision, he pursued his course as a service to Jesus Christ.

Wilberforce had undergone a dramatic conversion as a young man which changed his life from one of trivial pursuit to one of freeing the slaves. On his deathbed he received word that

Parliament had acted and twenty million pounds had been delegated to release the remaining slaves of England. And on that day in 1833, 700,000 British slaves were freed. Wilberforce was greatly moved to know that a whole lifetime of effort on his part had finally seen fruition, and he thanked God for bringing it to pass.<sup>41</sup>

Much of what has been said above regarding the practice of slavery in the first century and its abolition in Britain, could be said of slavery in America. Christians like General Robert E. Lee (1807-1870) willingly set them free. And Christians like Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) were willing to go to war to set them free. Accordingly, Dr. Kennedy writes:

We know that two-thirds of the members of the abolition society in 1835 were ministers of the gospel. It is well-known that many of the leading practitioners of the Underground Railroad were Quakers. Abraham Lincoln's Christianity is well-documented; his writings are filled with Bible quotes. Ultimately, Christianity and slavery are incompatible. Robert E. Lee, who freed the slaves he had inherited by marriage, once wrote that the War between the States was needless bloodshed in terms of ending slavery, for he believed the evil institution would have eventually withered away because of Christianity.<sup>42</sup>

Again, while we could wish that changes would have occurred more rapidly, it is a historical fact that Christians have been at the forefront, almost exclusively, in working to rid humanity of the sinful scourge of slavery. Accordingly, Dr. Archer comments: "No equivalent movement toward abolition is discernible in any non-Christian civilization of which we have any knowledge."<sup>43</sup> So while we may not be completely pleased with how long slavery existed in Christian America, what nation or religion has come even close to doing as much for slaves? None. Dr. Kennedy writes:

Over the centuries, Christianity abolished slavery, first in the ancient world and then later in the nineteenth century, largely through the efforts of the strong evangelical William Wilberforce. It didn't happen overnight, and certainly there have been dedicated Christians who were slaveowners. Nonetheless, the end of slavery, which has plagued mankind for thousands of years, has come primarily through the efforts of Christians.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately, while slavery is not acceptable in any country of the world that could call itself Christian, this evil has continued to prosper especially in Buddhist and Muslim dominated countries, which proves *virtue apologetics* for Christianity once again.<sup>45</sup>

## F) Denominational Divisions

A legitimate critique of Christian virtue is the apparent divisions within its ranks. As Dr. Latourette notes:

No other religion has so high an ideal of an inclusive community of love. Yet, as we are to see again and again in the course of our story [of Christian history], no other religion has had as many divisions and as many bitter controversies between its adherents.<sup>46</sup>

It should be admitted that a great deal of dissension within Christianity has been caused by a lack of virtue such as pride and selfishness. However, much of the division has occurred for virtuous reasons. Such is the case with the most well known division which occurred in the Protestant Reformation. Here again, it is important to distinguish between real Christianity and *Christendom*. In fact, this is what the Reformation was all about.

*Christendom* had fallen into several doctrinal and moral errors including the corruption of the Gospel itself, the cornerstone of authentic Christianity. In restoring the truth to God's people, an unfortunate but necessary division between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants occurred. It was indeed virtue that propelled the Protestant Christians to restore the Bible to the people, reestablish the true Gospel of salvation by grace through faith, and condemn a greedy pagan Pope who sold forgiveness for sins in order to build a monument to himself.<sup>47</sup>

Far from being a stain on the morality of true Christianity, the Protestant Reformation is yet another demonstration of the true Christian's commitment to do the right thing. What the world often doesn't understand is that it is moral to stand up for biblical truth, and such a stand may require the rejection of those who are perverting it (cf. 2 Thess 3:14-15; 1 Tim 6:3-5; Titus 1:9). Contrary to worldly wisdom, toleration is not always moral, especially when false teachings and immoral practices are hurting innocent people.

Even if separating Christians have been wrong in their view of the truth, many times they have separated just because of this commitment to preserve what they feel is the truth, for the sake of others. While such divisions admittedly may not look moral, nor at times may not be moral, there is often an authentic moral element to them.

The fact that Christianity displays several denominations is not automatically a strike against virtue. Again, what the world may deem as disunity, is often actually virtuous diversity. Many differences in Christian fellowships merely reflect different cultures, demographics, and backgrounds. The differences are not so much in *what* the Bible commands us, which is nonnegotiable, but in *how* it is to be obeyed,

which is something for which God grants freedom of preference. Accordingly, such areas as the method of worship or liturgy, the Bible does not prescribe, and all such differences are legitimate and even praiseworthy.

In addition, the most obvious difference between Christians in a given community is the mere fact that they meet in different buildings, which need not reflect badly at all on their virtue. In fact, the relational differences between different branches of Christianity are relatively minimal, and this is apparent to anyone who would truly get to know them. Accordingly, the influential Reformed theologian John Gerstner (1914-1996) wrote:

Most churches freely commune with one another, join together in common enterprises for the total welfare of the community, associate with one another in unions of churches, make common testimonies to the world, and engage in common charities for the world. All in all, there is far more co-operation among churches than unwholesome rivalry.<sup>48</sup>

Accordingly, the majority of differences between most Christian churches is not doctrinal, but practical in terms of forms of worship or other secondary issues that the Bible does not prescribe, allowing freedom for various expressions. What some might interpret as schism in Christianity is nothing more than a biblically sanctioned variety and diversity in how we worship God and govern our churches. Likewise, the reasons for many of the practical differences between Christian churches are not doctrinal in nature either, but normally derive from differences in geography, culture, demographics, and historical background.

In fact, *virtue apologetics* can be enhanced, rather than destroyed by denominational divisions. Even the world can recognize that real love does not begin until you don't like someone. Our doctrinal divisions may certainly reflect the fact we don't like some things about the church down the street. But such a situation can make the supernatural character of our love for one another all the more evident. People who agree on everything don't even need to love each other. And the world doesn't view mere intellectual unity as a virtue, but with suspicion. *Virtue apologetics* will still work in spite of our differences, and even more powerfully so. Francis Schaeffer (1912–1984) profoundly pointed this out several years ago when he wrote:

Before a watching world an observable love in the midst of difference will show a difference between Christians' differences and other men's differences. The world may not understand what the Christians are disagreeing about, but they will very quickly understand the difference of our differences from the world's differences if they see us having our differences in an open and observable love on a practical level.

That is different. Can you see why Jesus said this was the thing that would arrest the attention of the world [cf. John 13:34-35]? You cannot expect the world to understand doctrinal differences, especially in our day when the existence of true truth and absolutes are considered unthinkable even as concepts. We cannot expect the world to understand that on the basis of the holiness of God we are having a different kind of difference because we are dealing with God's absolutes. But when they see differences among true Christians who also show an observable unity, this will open the way for them to consider the truth of Christianity and Christ's claim that the Father did send the Son. . .

Our sharp tongues, the lack of love between us-not the necessary statements of differences that may exist between true Christians, these are what properly trouble the world.<sup>49</sup>

If anyone would still doubt the general unity that underlies Christianity, just subject one or more Christians to unjust persecution for their faith. The real family that real Christians are, will immediately become apparent, and the persecutor will quickly find that they are now at odds with a multitude.

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## ***Extras & Endnotes***

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### ***Gauging Your Grasp***

- 1) How do we define *Christendom*? How does it differ from Christianity?
- 2) What are several characteristics of the "Inquisitions" that clearly expose them as not Christian?
- 3) What are several characteristics of the "Crusades" that clearly expose them as not Christian?
- 4) How can *virtue apologetics* still overcome the moral criticisms directed toward historical Christianity (wrongly or rightly) in the lives of the people we know?
- 5) What are aspects of first century slavery that reasonably explain why Christianity did not immediately abolish it?

- 6) What are aspects of Christianity that biblically explain why Christianity did not immediately abolish it?
- 7) What are aspects of first century slavery that made it more humane than is often thought?
- 8) What value is there in the fact that no religion comes even close to Christianity in terms of abolishing slavery, and that while it no longer exists in countries influenced by Christianity, it continues to flourish in Buddhist and Muslim dominated areas?
- 9) What are some virtuous reasons for the differences between Christians?
- 10) Do you agree with the statement, "All in all, there is far more co-operation among churches than unwholesome rivalry"? Why or why not?
- 11) How can Christians make the most of *virtue apologetics* even in the context of differences?

### **Publications & Particulars**

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<sup>1</sup> For additional discussion concerning the execution of Michael Servetus see Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Electronic Edition STEP Files (Findex.com, 1999), Vol. 7, ch. XVI.

<sup>2</sup> John Mark Reynolds, "Christianity and Culture: Defending Our Fathers and Mothers" in *Apologetics for a New Generation*, Sean McDowell ed. (Harvest House, 2009), 71.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hackett, *The Reconstruction of the Christian Revelation Claim* (Baker, 1984), 337.

<sup>4</sup> D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born?: The Positive Impact of Christianity in History* (Thomas Nelson, 1997), 209.

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, 216.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-17.

<sup>7</sup> John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, CD-ROM (Ages Software, 2000), IV:176, 178.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, IV:177.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, IV:184, 189.

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- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., IV:177.
- <sup>11</sup> Kenneth Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (Hendricksen, 1975), 452-4.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 453-5.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., 435, 845.
- <sup>14</sup> McClintock and Strong, IV:180, 192-3.
- <sup>15</sup> Kennedy, 205.
- <sup>16</sup> Latourette, 658.
- <sup>17</sup> McClintock and Strong, II:96.
- <sup>18</sup> Kenneth A. Curtis, Stephen Lang and Randy Petersen, *The 100 Most Important Events in Christian History* (Baker, 1998), 73.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 74.
- <sup>20</sup> Kennedy, 208. This quote comes from St. Bernard of Clairveaux, who, because he had a reputation for being a sincere Christian, it is disappointing that he apparently supported the Crusades.
- <sup>21</sup> Latourette, 410, 411, 413.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 414.
- <sup>23</sup> Latourette, 437, 550, 641-2.
- <sup>24</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Harper Collins, 1960), 32.
- <sup>25</sup> Kennedy, 219.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 20.
- <sup>28</sup> Gleason Archer, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Difficulties* (Zondervan, 1982), 86
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (Harper Collins, 2005), 107.
- <sup>31</sup> Latourette, 245-6.
- <sup>32</sup> Our sources regarding first century slavery include: S. S. Bartchy, "Slavery" in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE)*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., 4 vols., (Eerdmans, 1988), IV:539-46; Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 2000), 562-5. (See several scholarly books on the topic of first century slavery listed here).
- <sup>33</sup> David Clowney, "The Use of the Bible in Ethics" in *Inerrancy & Hermeneutic*, Harvey Conn ed. (Baker, 1988), 228-9.
- <sup>34</sup> Kennedy, 19-20.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>36</sup> Clowney, 228-9.

<sup>37</sup> There is some debate on the meaning of the Greek text at 1 Corinthians 7:21. Leon Morris agrees with most modern translations and writes:

The second part of the verse is something like 'But if also you can become free, rather use (it)', and the pundits are divided as to what this means. Some, impressed by the evidence throughout the paragraph on remaining in one's state, think Paul is saying, 'Even if you can gain your freedom, make the most of your present condition instead.' [i.e. and don't seek freedom]. This is a possible understanding of the Greek, but against it is the aorist imperative, which more naturally signifies the beginning of a new 'use' than the continuance of an old one.

It is also difficult to think that Paul, who held that marriage introduced difficulties in the way of Christian service, could have thought otherwise about slavery, which introduced much more serious difficulties. Paul seems to be saying: 'Your state is not of first importance. If you are a slave do not worry. If you can be made free, then make use of your new status. It is your relationship to the Lord that matters most.' (*1 Corinthians* [Eerdmans, 1985], 110).

<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, Gordon Fee comments concerning 1 Corinthians 7:

His point right along, therefore, has not been simply, "Stay where you are," but precisely as in this case [of slavery], "Do not let your social condition be a concern to you." Your calling in Christ eclipses such conditions, but thereby also transforms them into situations where you may live out your Christian "calling." (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT) (Eerdmans, 1987), 316).

<sup>39</sup> Kennedy, 20.

<sup>40</sup> John MacArthur, *MacArthur's New Testament Commentary*, Electronic Edition STEP Files CD-ROM (Parsons Technology, 1997), 1 Cor 7:20 ff.

<sup>41</sup> Kennedy, 21.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>43</sup> Archer, 86

<sup>44</sup> Kennedy, 18.

<sup>45</sup> See the article, "Modern Slavery" in the web-based Infoplease Almanac at <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/slavery1.html>.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 119

<sup>47</sup> We are referring to St. Peter's basilica in Rome

<sup>48</sup> John Gerstner, *Reasons for Faith* (Harper & Row, n.d.), 222.

<sup>49</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of a Christian* (Intervarsity, 1970), 30-31, 23. Dr. Schaeffer added some convicting words as well:

If, when we feel we must disagree as true Christians, we could simply guard our tongues and speak in love, in five or ten years the bitterness could be gone. Instead of that, we leave scars—a curse for generations. Not just a curse in the church, but a curse in the world. Newspaper

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headlines bear it in our Christian press, and it boils over into the secular press at times-Christians saying such bitter things about other Christians.

The world looks, shrugs its shoulders and turns away. It has not seen even the beginning of a living church in the midst of a dying culture. It has not seen the beginning of what Jesus indicates is the final apologetic-observable oneness among true Christians who are truly brothers in Christ. (23)